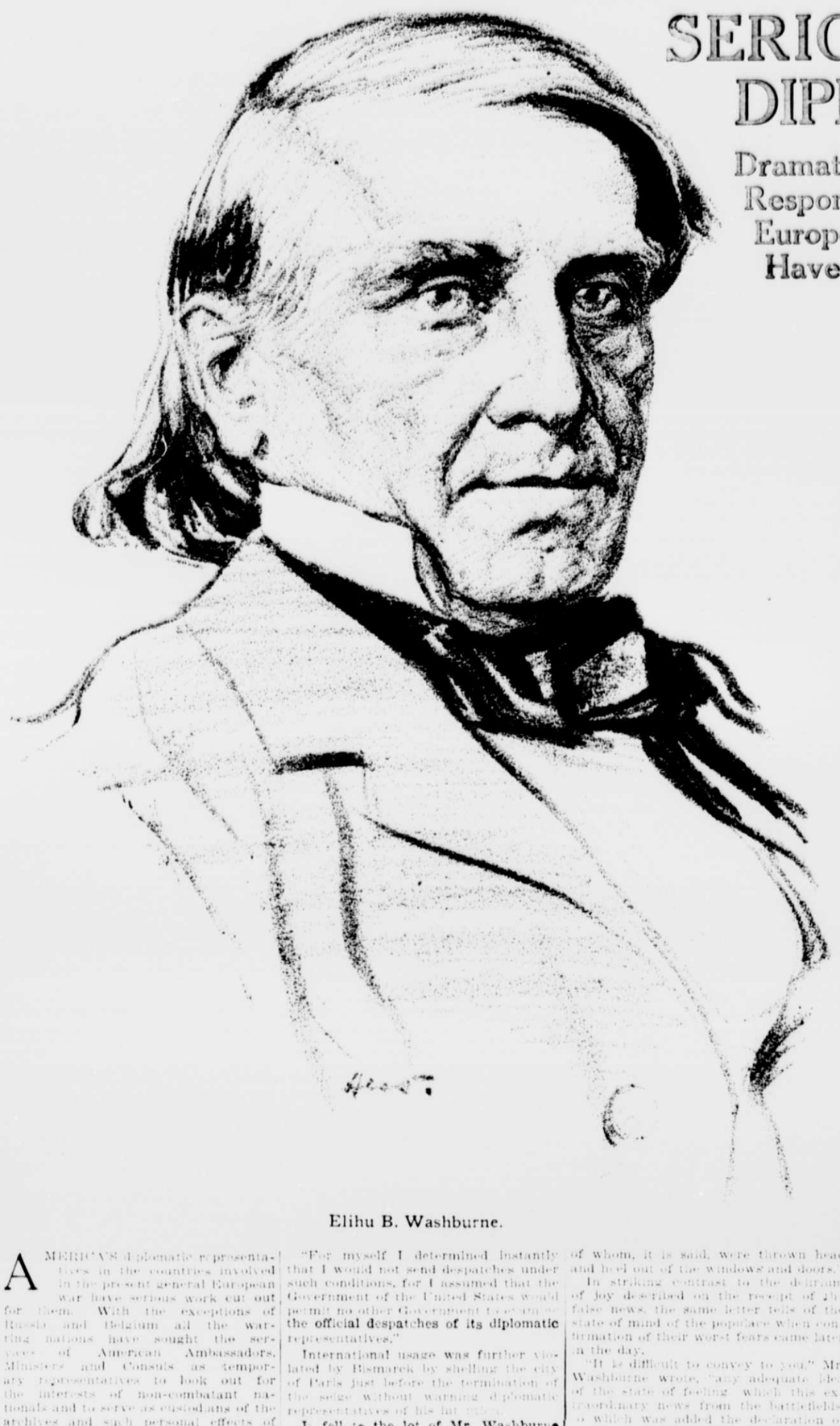
SERIOUS PROBLEMS OF AMERICAN DIPLOMATISTS IN WARRING COUNTRIES

Dramatic Letters of Elihu B. Washburne Give Suggestion of Responsibilities Confronting United States Representatives in Europe—With Exception of Russia and Belgium Nations at War Have Sought Services of Our Ambassadors, Ministers and Consuls



Elihu B. Washburne.

AMERICAN diplomatic representatives in the countries involved in the present general European war have serious work cut out for them. With the exceptions of Russia and Belgium all the warring nations have sought the services of American Ambassadors, Ministers and Consuls as temporary representatives to look out for the interests of non-combatant nationals and to serve as custodians of the archives and such personal effects of the representatives as may be left behind when passports are exchanged and diplomatic relations formally are ended.

These are serious responsibilities, for the representation is no shadowy obligation, no international fiction. It means labor of the most arduous and at the same time of the most delicate character. It presents a new experience for the present generation of American diplomats.

In an earlier day an American diplomat enjoyed—or suffered—this experience, as will be related further on. Of late years, however, there have been but two wars of sufficient worldwide importance to necessitate delicate diplomatic handling of the affairs of the combatant nations. Those were the Russo-Japanese war, when Great Britain took over the affairs of the Japanese and France served in the capacity for Russia, and the Spanish-American war, when Great Britain looked after our interests and France took charge of the affairs of the kingdom of Spain. During the Spanish-American war but few questions of an involved character arose. During the Russo-Japanese war there were questions of extreme delicacy to be adjusted.

But back in the days when the empire of Louis Napoleon was tottering to its fall Uncle Sam's representative played the most spectacular part as guardian, commissioner and near friend not alone for one nation but for all the nations of the world. During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 Elihu B. Washburne, then American Minister at Paris, was the only diplomatic official of any nation to remain in the beleaguered city throughout the war of conquest, in which Prussia like a scourge swept over all of northern France, driving the broken legions of the Second Napoleon before her, but afterward during the weary weeks of the bitter winter's siege of the gay capital and in the nightmare of the Commune, which followed it.

The tribulations of a diplomat in the midst of a war are set forth in a most interesting series of letters now in the archives of the State Department at Washington. Fortunately for posterity Mr. Washburne possessed the writing instinct. A genial, elderly gentleman, with the outward aspect and mein of a plain Illinois farmer and a mind as clear and bright as that of the most accomplished journalist, Mr. Washburne set down his experiences day by day. His despatches to the home Government at Washington are marvels of modern reporting at standards for any city room in the land. He combined with his multifarious duties as a diplomat the remarkable capacity for making his reports good readable news.

During the siege of Paris Count (later Prince) von Bismarck took the position that diplomatic representatives at Paris should not and could not transmit through the lines to neutral territory despatches sealed or in code. Virtually all of the diplomatic correspondence had to be sent across the Channel to England by such messengers as could break down the latter through insistence upon diplomatic privilege. Mr. Washburne discovering this to be Bismarck's attitude wrote at once to Secretary of State Hamilton Fish:

"For myself I determined instantly that I would not send despatches under such conditions, for I assumed that the Government of the United States would permit no other Government to examine the official despatches of its diplomatic representatives."

International usage was further violated by Bismarck by shelling the city of Paris just before the termination of the siege without warning diplomatic representatives of his intention.

It fell to the lot of Mr. Washburne almost from the beginning of the war to protect German nationals in Paris. The French Ministry had determined that none should leave the confines of Paris who were of military age. Thousands were jailed and many were subjected to insult and persecution by the citizens of Paris. Upon strong and insistent representations by Mr. Washburne many were ultimately permitted to withdraw. This was his first important clash with the authorities. After the investment of Paris had begun it was only with the greatest difficulty that Mr. Washburne was able to procure safe passage even for Americans outside the lines of the city, and he wrote to the Secretary of State:

It had been twice decided that at this stage of the siege no foreigner would be permitted to leave Paris, but after several interviews on the subject with Gen. Trochu and M. Jules Favre of the cabinet of the new Republic of France they finally decided to change their determination and "let all of our Americans go who wanted to leave." Within a few days he again wrote: "I am very glad that I have so many of our countrymen safely away."

In his letters to the State Department the American Minister graphically describes the cruel hoax perpetrated upon the people of Paris when they were deceived by the Imperial Government as to the results of the first flashing across the frontier of Alsace. Instead of the first disastrous defeat, Paris was led to understand that the first great encagement had resulted in a prodigious victory for the French arms at Wissenbourg.

The letter to Secretary Fish relates:

"Things, however, passed on quietly enough until about noon on Saturday, when, as the report goes, a man in the uniform of a courier or messenger rode up to the front of the Bourse, where a large crowd had already assembled and delivered into the hands of a person, who was evidently his confederate, what purported to be an official despatch and which gave an account of a great battle having been fought, in which the French had been victorious, taken forty guns, 25,000 prisoners, among whom was included the Crown Prince. * * * The assembled multitude broke out into the wildest shouts * * * the people rushed into the streets; the flags were everywhere displayed, men embraced and kissed each other, shedding tears of joy. Shouts, vociferations and oaths filled the air, and probably such a delirium was never before witnessed. * * *

"After the first furore of enthusiasm had subsided some persons began to suggest that it would be well to inquire a little further into the news, and of course the result was that it proved to be a stupendous hoax. * * * As it originated at the Bourse, the cry was raised in the crowd, 'A la Bourse!' and away the people went breathing vengeance against the money changers and the speculators who, it was alleged, had taken advantage of the false report to get the benefit of a rise of about 4 per cent. in the stocks. Never were money changers more summarily driven out of their temple. In a few moments all persons in the Bourse were expelled, some of whom, it is said, were thrown head and heel out of the windows and doors."

In striking contrast to the delirium of joy described on the receipt of the false news, the same letter tells of the state of mind of the populace when confirmation of their worst fears came later in the day.

"It is difficult to convey to you," Mr. Washburne wrote, "any adequate idea of the state of feeling which this extraordinary news from the battlefields, to which was added the declaration of the siege of Paris, and the convocation of the Corps Legislatif, has created. Paris has hardly ever seen such a day since the time of the First Revolution. The whole people seems paralyzed by the terrible events which have burst upon them in such rapid and fearful succession."

A few days later Mr. Washburne was able to describe to his chief the overturning of the Bonaparte dynasty and the declaration of a republic in Paris. He tells of the interruption of a session of the Corps Legislatif which he attended, which had been convoked for the purpose of instituting a Government for national defence.

"The hall was filled with dust," he wrote, describing the scene in the legislative chamber after soldiers and populace had taken possession, "and a rough looking man was in the President's chair surrounded by a number of men still more rough in appearance. The soldiers and the people were occupying the seats of the Deputies, writing letters, looking over documents and talking and laughing, all in the best humor.

"Leaving the chamber, we went at once to the Hotel de Ville. The building had been invaded by the people and all the windows, fronting on the square were filled with rough and dirty looking men and boys. * * * At precisely 4 o'clock and forty-five minutes in the afternoon, by the great clock in the tower of the Hotel de Ville, at one of the windows appeared Gambetta; a little behind him stood Jules Favre and Monnel Arago, and then and there on that historic spot Gambetta proclaimed the republic."

After describing the transports of enthusiasm with which the proclamation was received, he continued: "During all this time there was no pillage, no havoc, no destruction of property, and the crowd soon retired, leaving the palace under the protection of the National Guard."

Concluding this letter, he wrote:

"The day had been pleasant, and the night beautiful beyond description. After making a call upon Lord Lyons I returned to my lodgings to ponder over the events of the day to become memorable in history. In a few brief hours of a Sabbath day I had seen a dynasty fall and a republic proclaimed, and all without the shedding of one drop of blood."

In the archives of the State Department is this description of the flight of the Empress by night—a letter from the American Minister to Belgium, J. R. Jones:

"Dr. Evans, an American dentist of Paris, was in to see me two or three days since and told me that on Sunday P.M., September 4, the Empress, accompanied by a Mme. Bretton, left the Tuileries as the crowd was rushing in, took a little hack they found on the street and drove to his house * * * where they remained until 5 o'clock the next morning, when he took the ladies in his carriage, accompanied by a Dr. Crane, and drove fifty-six miles on their way to Trouville. * * * Near Trouville they took a little sail vessel of thirty-eight tons, going on board at 1 o'clock at night, and crossed over to the Isle of Wight, being twenty hours in crossing, the whole party being literally drenched from the washing of the waves over the little boat."

Bismarck.

with the promise of the French authorities that they shall be protected. I have now 150 that I am providing for. From the Prussian fund still remaining in my hands I think I have sufficient to take care of them till the end of the siege."

By January 9 Prussian shells had commenced to fall in Paris. "A great many shells have fallen in the city, on the left bank of the river, particularly in the neighborhood of the Luxembourg and the Pantheon. Some twenty or thirty people have been killed and wounded, including women and children. * * * I am quite confident that my residence can now be reached by the Prussian batteries, but it is doubtful whether the legation is within reach of any battery yet opened. * * * The number of deaths for the last week is 3,680, which is quite an increase over the number the week before."

January 25, 1871, Mr. Washburne wrote: "The past week has been one of great interest. The Government issued its order for the rationing of bread on the 18th instant, which is an evidence of a 'beginning of the end.' The amount issued is three-fifths of a pound to all except children under 5 years of age, who receive one-half of that quantity. This allowance is small and the quality of the bread issued is very poor indeed. It has only about thirty-one hundredths of flour. The balance is made up of oatmeal and rice, and some say peas and beans form a part of this admixture. It is a sad sight to see the long queues at all the bakeshops. * * * The mairies are rationing very small quantities of horse meat, a little rice, beans, peas and occasionally herring and codfish."

Five days after this was written negotiations for an armistice were described by Mr. Washburne in a letter to the Secretary, and February 5, with the siege suspended, provisions commenced to come into Paris. Speaking of the conditions up to that time Mr. Washburne wrote:

"The lower classes of the city have during the last month of the siege suffered untold miseries of cold and hunger, and with a patience and fortitude which does them credit. Indeed the suffering of all classes has been very great, and it might be said that all classes have sustained the suffering and privations of the siege in a manner that must excite the wonder and admiration of the world. * * * While there had been a great deal of hostility against us among a certain number of the population of Paris during the siege, and while I have been assailed in the clubs and in the newspapers on account of my protection of the Germans, I have no cause whatever for complaint against the Government of the national defence, but have been treated by them with the greatest kindness and with all the consideration due to me as the diplomatic representative of our country."

February 28, the day before the occupation of Paris by 30,000 Germans, Mr. Washburne wrote: "Provisions are now plenty and cheaper than before the siege. The great want here now is the means of locomotion, the greater number of the horses having been killed for food during the siege. * * * "

One day later this same bright heartedness was again blotted out by the entrance of the Germans who were to remain until the final ratification of the peace treaty with Germany. This entrance into the city is described dramatically and at length by Mr. Washburne in a letter of March 1, 1871:

"Sir—They have come in. At 9 o'clock this A. M. three blue hussars entered the Port Maillot, proceeded up the avenue of the Grand Army and walked their horses slowly down the magnificent avenue of the Champs Elysees with carbines cocked and fingers upon the trigger. These hussars looked carefully into the side streets and proceeded slowly down the avenue. But few people were out at that early hour in the morning. Soon after six more made their appearance by the same route, and every few minutes thereafter the number increased. Then came in the main body of the advance guard, numbering about 1,000 men, consisting of cavalry and infantry, Bavarian and Prussian, forming part of the Eleventh Corps, under the command of Gen. Kamicki. By this time the crowd on the Champs Elysees had increased and met the advancing Germans with hisses and insult. A portion of the German troops then halted and with great deliberation loaded their pieces, whereat the crowd, composed of boys and 'roughs,' incontinently took to their heels.

"According to a previous understanding among the French, all the shops and restaurants along the route had been closed, but notwithstanding their vigorous asseverations that no consideration whatever would induce them to look upon or speak to the 'Prussians,' I found on going to the Champs Elysees at half past 9 o'clock a large number of them attracted thither by a curiosity which they were unable to resist. In walking down the avenue to the point where the main body of the force had halted, in front of the Palace of Industry, notwithstanding the vehement protestations that had been made that no Frenchmen would look at or speak to a German soldier, I counted a body of twenty-five French people, men, women and children, in the most cordial fraternization with the German soldiers. * * * It was not until about half past 1 o'clock in the afternoon that the Royal Guard of Prussia, in four solid bodies, surrounded the Arc of Triumph. Then a company of Uhlans, with their spears stuck in their saddles and ornamented by the little flag of blue and white, headed the advancing column.

"They were followed by the Saxons with their light blue coats, who were succeeded by the Bavarian riflemen, with their heavy uniforms and martial tread. Afterward followed more of the Uhlans and occasionally a squad of the Bismarck cuirassiers with their white jackets, square hats and waving plumes, recalling to mind, perhaps, among the more intelligent French observers, the celebrated cuirassiers of the Nansouty and Le Tour Maubourg, in the wars of the First Napoleon. Now came the artillery, with its pieces of six, which must have extorted the admiration of all military men by its splendid appearance and wonderful precision of movement. Next fell into line the royal guard of Prussia, with their shining casques and glittering bayonets, which had been massed around the world renowned Arc of Triumph, erected (and with what bitter sarcasm it may now be said, to the glory of the Grand Army.

"I witnessed this entry from the balcony of the apartment of Mr. Cook, at the head of the Champs Elysees, a great many French people were on the sidewalk on either side of the avenue. At first troops were met with hisses, catcalls, and all sorts of insulting cries, but as they poured thicker and fast, and, forming by companies, as they swept down the avenue to the strain of martial music the crowd seemed to be awed into silence and no other sound was heard but the tramp of the soldiers and the occasional word of command. The only disturbance I saw was occasioned by some individual advancing from the sidewalk and giving his hand to a German cavalryman, whereat the crowd 'went for' him; but his backing seemed so powerful that the dissidents soon dispersed without inflicting any injuries. * * * My conclusion was so thoroughly penetrated with fear of the 'Prussians' that he utterly refused to harness his horses during the day and, as I have been obliged to be upon my feet most of the time since morning, you can well imagine my fatigue as I sit down to write this despatch in the evening.

"From the Boulevard du Temple to the Arc de Triomphe not a store or restaurant is open, with the exception of two of the latter on the Champs Elysees, which the Germans have ordered to be kept open. There are no excited crowds on the boulevards, and what is very remarkable, and without precedent in the memory of the 'oldest inhabitant,' not an omnibus is running in the whole city and every omnibus office is closed. Neither is there a private or a public carriage to be seen, unless a hack shall be deemed and taken as a public carriage; unfortunately, too many of which are to be seen now every hour in the day.

"Paris seems literally to have died out. There is neither song nor shout in all her streets. The whole population is marching around as if under a cloud of oppression."

Scene From Movie Play Staged Near Present Battlefield

A battle in the Great Northern Film Company's photo play, "Lay Down Your Arms."